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SUBJECT: BELGIAN GOVERNMENT FORMATION - ADRIFT, BUT STILL
AFLOAT

REF: Brussels 3308

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Yves Leterme's attempt to form a new Belgian government is still alive, but there seems little chance that it will succeed anytime soon. A recent series of inter-communal flaps, all centered around the bilingual communes surrounding Brussels, have brought a pause to Leterme's efforts. Some leaders, including FM De Gucht and Finance Minister Reynders are working to recreate an atmosphere in which talks can resume. In the meantime, it appears that some leaders are at least talking informally. End summary

¶2. (U) Flemish Christian Democrat (CD&V) leader Yves Leterme's attempt to form Belgium's next federal government is still alive, but it remains as far from success today as it was when he began the effort, 160 days (and counting) ago. Leterme and his "orange (Christian Democrat) - blue (Liberal)" partners from the Flemish and francophone parts of the country have reached broad agreement on most important issues save one, the vexing question of institutional reform. This subject is generally understood to mean re-dividing responsibilities between federal, regional, and communal governments. There is a good reason why it has poisoned the government formation process - too many politicians on both sides of the language divide have made promises on institutional reform that they cannot redeem without near complete surrender by the other side. Until Leterme and his colleagues in the other coalition parties find a way to eat their many ill-judged and provocative words of the past five months, the formation process cannot move into an end game phase.

¶3. (U) The prospects for any, let alone rapid, movement during the last week of November appears to slim, most press commentators and our political contacts agree. Their pessimism now stands in sharp contrast to their hopeful attitude following a November 7 vote by a Parliamentary committee to redistrict the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde (BHV). The committee vote, if it actually becomes a law, would strip the vote of francophones living in the periphery of Brussels to cast their federal ballots for francophone parties competing in the Brussels constituency. The francophone parties were aghast that the Flemish had used their numerical advantage to push through a measure opposed so strongly by French speakers. Although anathema to the francophone parties (which had walked out of the committee before the vote), francophone Christian Democratic and Liberal leaders pointedly made clear they were still willing to talk to Leterme about forming the next government. Leterme himself had seemed to hint at a willingness to back away from demands for far-reaching changes in the balance between the regional

and federal government, suggesting that he would settle for alterations requiring less than the two-thirds majority needed to effect a constitutional change.

14. (U) The optimism of November 7 disappeared for three reasons. The first reason involved pressure from backbenchers in Leterme's party, and from his "cartel" allies in the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), a Flemish nationalist group. This convinced CD&V leaders to issue statement on November 9 indicating that the party would continue to seek "meaningful" institutional reform. Francophone leaders considered this as meaning that Leterme was more interested in protecting his position in the 2009 regional elections than in striking a deal with them in November 2007. The second and third reasons concerned the BHV dispute. Flemish leaders universally rejected a francophone appeal for a conciliatory gesture following the committee vote on BHV, arguing that they were simply carrying out a judicial order and thus had done nothing requiring any apology. Citing legal grounds, the Flemish regional government infuriated francophones further by refusing to approve the selection of francophone mayors in three of the communes bordering Brussels. Francophones thought this action to be a "slap in the face" and disproportionate to the admitted infractions committed by the three mayors, who had sent francophone residents an official announcement of the federal and communal elections in French rather than Dutch, as required by Flemish law.

15. (U) Several other developments have contributed to the gloomy atmosphere of the last week. King Albert II's attempt to subsume the current debate on constitutional change with a more long-term effort - the so-called "Committee of Wise Men" - has yet to get under way, not

least because the Socialist and Green opposition parties have refused to "rescue" Leterme from his own mistakes during the formation process. The scattered catcalls from Flemish nationalist louts and petty vandalism that occurred in front of the cathedral in Brussels during a November 15 Te Deum held to celebrate the Royal Family's rule (with most members of the Royal family inside) made clear that the Sovereign is far from being a unifying figure. Most telling, however, has been the continued absence of any formal discussions between the parties since the November 7 vote in Parliament. There were no signs of any talks getting underway over the next few days.

16. (SBU) There are at least a few hints of possible progress. Senior officials in the francophone and Flemish Liberal parties have confirmed press reports of informal contacts between the potential coalition party presidents. They reportedly have attempted to sketch out a possible format and timetable for relatively non-controversial constitutional changes. Some leaders on both sides of the language divide also have attempted, albeit belatedly, to inject an element of common sense into the debate. FM Karel De Gucht, for example, published a long op-ed piece condemning the Flemish for abusing their numerical superiority while castigating francophones for unreasonably refusing even to talk about Flemish interest in constitutional changes. Similarly, the prominent francophone newspaper Le Soir has sponsored a public forum where members of the two language groups have been able to hear the other side's opinions, unfiltered by journalistic commentators. It remains to be seen if these positive steps will lead anywhere useful.

17. (U) Finance Minister Reynders, a francophone Liberal, has worked to strengthen his position as leader of his community by convening the other francophone party presidents to meetings at his ministerial office or Liberal party headquarters. Reynders also has tried to make clear to the Flemings that the francophones are deeply interested not so much in a receiving a good will

gesture as an indication of their willingness to remain part of a united Belgium, particularly one where the majority community cannot impose actions on the minority. In that connection, Reynders said in a recent interview that he could see a need for institutional reforms, but only if done in a fair and balanced manner. He envisioned such a process taking place over several years under the leadership of elder statesmen.

18. (SBU) Comment: Against all the evidence to the contrary, Leterme may still succeed eventually in delivering a new government for lack of any alternative path out of the crisis. It will be, as one local journalist put it, "an ugly baby," but odds are that it will eventually come into being. End comment.
BUSH